



## The Social PM Approach

by Catherine Constantinides, January 16, 2012 | SHARE

Product development requires a unified, collaborative team effort. A social project management framework, combined with the right social tools, helps to connect team activities to the product development process and stakeholders. The benefits include increased visibility, more accurate estimates, responsive, real-time analysis and streamlined workflows.

Today's project managers are asked to do more with less. They are encouraged to do less planning, with smaller budgets, more rapid product iterations, and deliver releases quicker. Another common difficulty is that, too often, project management activities are out of the loop from the rest of the product development process. This disconnect results in the setting of unrealistic goals, cost overruns and work estimates that do not necessarily align with organizational strategies.

To add to the complexity of product development, today's project managers are now expected to be incorporate social technology into the process in order to increase communication and promote more collaboration between team members, business partners and customers.

By definition, social project management encompasses both the traditional approaches of project management and the more open, collaborative nature promoted by web 2.0. While the overused term "social" is as often vague and open-ended, in the context of project management the social component actually refers to the methods used to share critical project-related information and unify large distributed teams both inside and outside the organization.

Logically, adopting a more social approach to project management can help streamline operations and allow project management a more inclusive role within product

development. In addition to this, social tools have also emerged as practical options for

teams to use to organize, manage, and share work-related knowledge and information. The following are social tools that help facilitate project management:

**Social collaboration tools:** These include internal employee blogs, wikis, chat application integration and discussion forums.

**How they are collectively being used:** As project managers promote a culture of collaboration between stakeholders, they seek the right social technologies to help facilitate communication both inside and outside the organization walls. Internal social collaboration tools can effectively be used to speed up communication between stakeholders, break down internal silos, encourage employee participation, facilitate discussion and the sharing of knowledge and ideas across the organization.

**Social web and customer feedback tools:** Social media monitoring tools allow project managers to capture conversations from various social channels related to their products and services, and feedback tools allow project teams to directly engage in two-way dialogue with customers to get a better understanding of their current needs and wants.

**How they are collectively being used:** To increase customer involvement, identify trends in the industry, benchmark against the competition and gain valuable customer feedback related to current and future product requirements.

**Social tools like these help to create a more collaborative project-based system by:**

**1. Increasing visibility and transparency across projects.** When the right social tools are applied to project management, and collaboration is promoted at the core, business processes are made more visible and transparent throughout the organization. As a result, project managers become an integrated part of the organization and can get and communicate more realistic insights from various stakeholders. Silos and isolation are eliminated and everyone knows what the project is about and how it is progressing.

**2. Providing responsive, real-time updates and analyses.** With shorter development cycles, comes the need to make more accurate cost estimates. This makes analyzing data based on shifting marketplace demands and corporate goals more difficult. Project tasks and statuses related to costs, task completion, time and budget, must therefore be updated dynamically — ‘as-it-happens’ —to ensure accuracy, better tracking, and to get a better scope of how projects are progressing overall.

**3. Facilitating internal and external collaboration between team members and customers.** Online social tools make communication easier between both internal and external teams regardless of their geographical location or physical distance. Collaboration between multi-disciplinary teams is greatly increased with the use of organizational portals, chat, email and internal company blogs designed to help teams get work done faster, share project ideas and avoid miscommunication. Project managers

can also use social tools like feedback portals to capture valuable customer insights related to product features, usability, cost and future releases.

**4. Enabling collaboration and promoting dialogue with customers.** When tasking out a product or service, the best way to know if the right features and essentially the right product or service is being built, is to get feedback from the people who know the products and services best — your customers. Project managers must be able to leverage feedback from their customers who are having real-time conversations about their products and services. These customer conversations may contain valuable insights related to product features, usability, cost and future releases, that help better define product requirements.

#### **Can social tools improve the agile process?**

In an agile environment, delivery times are shorter, usually consisting of weeks rather than months. An agile framework relies on being extremely responsive and being able to cope with constant changes in projects. Thus, it is imperative for project managers to gain insight into information as quickly and accurately as possible.

Social tools like wikis, blogs and instant messaging tools become even more useful in agile development environments where clear communication and effective collaboration across distributed teams is crucial to the success of the process. In addition, social media monitoring tools allow project teams to discover and manage critical feedback regarding project bottlenecks.

Social media monitoring tools can also be used by project managers to discover conversations surrounding products and services, benchmark against the competition and discover current trending topics in their industry — information that is extremely valuable during project management.

Finally, project managers could also be tapping into Facebook, Twitter, and leveraging these social networks to write smaller, more practical user stories and to get more frequent feedback from customers by getting product releases out earlier and more

often. Regardless of the types used, social tools help to increase efficiency, reduce costs, and contribute to the overall success of agile project management activities.

#### **Putting it all together**

Project managers understand that their ultimate objective is to get projects finished on time and within budget. In addition, the ability to make order out of chaos is what truly defines the quality of a project leader. Armed with a new social framework and equipped with the right social tools to help facilitate collaboration between stakeholders, increase customer involvement and streamline project workflows, project managers can build and deliver customer-centric products to market faster and more efficiently.

